

Chairman's Report 1 March 2018

Last year in Trinity Hall, Cambridge, in what was generally regarded as one of the best conferences laid on by the Society, the AGM indulged me as I presented a reflective overview of the life and history of the Society and a summary of some of the main themes the Committee had identified at its strategy meeting in October 2016 to enable the Society to fulfil its charitable objects in the fourth decade of its existence.

This year, in what will be a briefer report, I will focus on the practical ways in which the aspirational work of the Society in 2016 has translated into the lived reality of 2017. Your Committee met on four occasions during the year, on 31 May 2017, 3 October 2017, 21 November 2017 and 31 January 2018. Two members tendered their resignations: Canon Adrian Daffern for health reasons, and Revd Dr Catherine Shelley on her transition from private practice to parochial ministry. We thank them both for their particular contributions to the work of the Committee and the life of the Society. The Committee has been pleased to co-opt barrister, Ben Harrison, and - most recently - the Revd Paul Benfield, now registrar of Blackburn diocese, and Luke Tatum, assistant secretary to Southwark DAC.

The Committee's workload has increased as the activity of the Society has expanded, and I am working to ensure that the burden is more evenly spread amongst Committee members. There is scope for further refreshment and renewal in the coming year through additional elected and co-opted members. We are reliant on willing volunteers giving sacrificially of their time and talents. The effective day-to-day administration of the Society still rests in the able hands of Andrew Male who has never failed to respond with enthusiasm and good grace to the increasing demands placed upon him. The Society could not function without his calm efficiency at its core, and I am pleased to record the indefatigable work of Sarah Neden not merely at the Society's annual conferences but throughout the year. The debt we owe them for the work they do - often unseen and unthanked - is incalculable.

Education, education, education

The Committee vowed to place education in ecclesiastical law front and centre. And so it has. The work of Archdeacon Simon Baker and the education sub-committee which he chairs has been truly transformative, and at last the Society is being evangelical in engaging with clerical formation and promoting education. Those attending the AGM will see for themselves quite how successful it has been. This year's Day Conference has been confected by the education sub-committee to showcase its work and the huge potential which the Society has to fill an unmet need for teaching ecclesiastical law on theological colleges and on courses, in continuing ministerial education and for those appointed to various offices including archdeacon, bishop and churchwarden. The process is two-fold: to demystify the law of the church and make it accessible and intelligible; and to emphasise that it is facilitative and not

prohibitive in nature. Shifting perceptions so ecclesiastical law is seen as a tool for effective ministry is half the battle. Simon and his team are to be applauded for their vision and industry. It's hard work and I am sure they would welcome other volunteers to take a lead in this work.

Much of the routine work of the Society (for example, the journal, the newsletter, the London lectures, and various working parties) is concerned with its educational role. Without detracting from the importance of these items, and the considerable work undertaken by many individuals in delivering them so efficiently, particular mention should be made of some of the new initiatives the Society has undertaken.

- The revamped website was launched at Trinity Hall, under the direction of the Revd Russell Dewhurst, and has already proved its worth in promoting the Society's activities and in allowing both membership and registration for events to be done on line. Coupled with its presence on Twitter, the Society has finally embraced the age of the internet and social media.
- The Northern Province Lectures – to complement not rival the established programme in London – will commence in April with a talk on clergy discipline by Sir Mark Hedley, to be followed later in the year by presentations by me (as Chancellor of Leeds) in July, and by Sir Philip Mawer in October. The Society has been fairly criticised for its metropolitan bias, so it is hoped we can reach a new audience through this ambitious lecture series in Leeds. Thanks are due to Lizzie Wilson for her organisation, and her firm Wrigleys for their sponsorship.

Governance

Last year's AGM gave its unanimous approval to the proposal that the Society be wound up as an unincorporated association and reconstituted as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). A governance group, ably led by Dr Catherine Shelley, and more recently by Lizzie Wilson has taken forward this resolution. The task has been demanding and time consuming and a draft Constitution was the subject of a consultation with the entire membership, following which a final version was prepared and has been circulated. In the light of this broad assent and consensus it is hoped that the two resolutions tabled for this year's AGM will be passed *nem con* with acclamation.

Membership

The only shadow in the life of the Society has been a drop in membership caused, in large measure, by the lapse of a number of direct debits. Regrettably, the strategic recruitment campaign initiated by the Committee in October 2016 never gained traction, and the Deputy Chairman has now been charged with this specific brief. We know there is a demand: Ben Harrison was asked to carry out an email blitz, and an hour of his time yielded more than 25 new members in 7 days. If this can be repeated, then it won't be long before we have a thousand members. Recruitment, however, should be seen as the responsibility of the entire membership and not something delegated to an individual.

Reflection

During the past year, the widow of the Revd John Masding has gifted to the Society his books and papers. We have no archivist and the boxes lie unopened in my Chambers. I would

welcome a volunteer with the time to go through them. The Society must have regard to its past as well as its future. One figure from the early days who has died since the last AGM is Chancellor Michael Goodman, founder editor of the *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*. The President paid tribute to him at his funeral, as did I in the pages of the *Journal*. In Alan Bennett's play, *The History Boys*, the teacher Hector famously enjoins his students to hand their acquired knowledge to each other and to the next generation. In the rarefied world of ecclesiastical law, all we can do is imbibe the learning of those who have gone before us and "pass it on, boys, pass it on". I ask that you continue to hold the Committee in your prayers as we seek to carry out this vital task.

Mark Hill, St David's Day, 2018